

JAIL BULLETIN

Number 75

May, 1991

The Jail Bulletin is a monthly feature of the Crime Commission Update. The Bulletin may be used as a supplement to your jail inservice training program if officers study the material and complete the attached "open book" quiz. The Bulletin and quiz may be reproduced for use by your staff. We welcome any jail training material you would like to contribute to the Bulletin.

WHAT TO DO 'TIL THE SHRINK COMES

Every jail officer must deal with inmates with severe psychiatric problems at one time or another. The best procedure is to transfer these inmates to a mental health treatment facility or have a mental health professional counsel them, but there are times when you have to deal with them yourself while awaiting transfer or until a counselor arrives. The following article contains some good guidelines on dealing with psychiatric emergencies.

Handling Psychiatric Emergencies

You can handle many psychiatric emergencies. The crucial elements are trying instead of drawing back, and trusting your own intuition. This article is meant as a simple guide, saying no more than common sense, but legitimizing people's efforts to help people in trouble. Experience is, of course, the best teacher of all.

The first thing to do is listen. Don't be in a hurry to give advice. Listen first; try to understand what's happening, what the person is feeling. Get into the person's frame of reference. Try to talk in as quiet a place as possible.

Look for a "handle" to their situation. Try to figure out what's oppressing them, what's making them feel the way they feel. Once you've done that, you can start helping the person look for options for a way out of the dilemma.

You need to be calm. If you can't be calm, find someone else who can be. As you listen, try to be accepting. Don't be judgmental. If they feel something, they have a reason for feeling it; respect their integrity. If you're calm and listening, you can start responding to them, which will help clarify the situation.

Understand how people's self-esteem can be shot to pieces by crassness, inappropriate humor, or a casual air. Most people in emotional distress are feeling empty and helpless. Try not to make them feel worse about themselves. Look for the genuine assets in them and in their situation. Try to restore their self-confidence, but realistically. Don't overdo with praise and compliments.

Follow your hunches and your feelings: they're almost always right. Get in touch with what you feel then think about it. If you feel sad, chances are the other person feels sad. If you feel scared, chances are the other person is scared too. If you feel angry, chances are the other person feels confused too. Go ahead and say things like, "I'm really confused by what you say," or "You must really feel horrible about all that." Use feelings, not ideas, as your main guide.

Don't be ashamed of being ignorant or feeling helpless. The other person probably feels the same way. Therapy is a human act, not some mysterious mumbo-jumbo: ask questions if you're ignorant; admit it if you feel helpless. Don't pretend to know what you don't. (That's mystifying the other person.)

Let the other person tell you in their own way what's wrong. Don't make them follow your rules. Don't get them to "act out their feelings." This isn't fun and games: if you're trying to help people through a trying time, you'd better accept the responsibility that goes with that.

People become disturbed in different ways. Some are horribly depressed; some in a state of panic; some violent; some confused and irrational; some incomprehensible. Almost everyone in an emotional crisis is terrified of losing control. They want to feel some kind of support, some kind of protection, some kind of limit. Try to provide that. You are not supposed to be all tolerant. Behavior that is dangerous to self or to others needs to be controlled.

In the same line of thought, if you feel they are out of control, or that they are too much for you to deal with, don't pretend you are able to do what you can't do. Call or get someone with more experience to talk to or see them. It's foolish to take chances with people's lives, especially if they are dangerous to themselves or others.

Don't get hung up on the rhetoric of we-should-all-be-able-to-take-care-of-one-another. Sometimes we simply can't.

Tell people what you're doing. Don't mystify them. Don't make phone calls behind their backs, or agree with them when you're planning something else. No matter how flipped out someone is, there's always a part of them that's aware of reality: speak to that part and they'll respond.

If you start feeling bored, try to focus in on the problem. That's where you should be anyway. What's going on? How can you help? How can they help themselves? What do they need? What is the real problem and what are their options?

A word about depression . . . life is filled with insults, painful experiences and real losses. Not only is our self-esteem smashed time and again. We also have to endure separations from people close to us--family and friends who leave, who die, who are killed, who are suffering. There's a natural healing after such a loss but it takes time.

A word about paranoia . . . paranoia, as radical therapist Claude Steiner has said, is a state of "heightened awareness." Paranoid feelings are almost always justified, at least in part. Don't argue with them; try to see where they're true and what that means for the person.

A word about violent people . . . violent people are often very frightened and can be calmed down if you protect them and treat them as people, not monsters. Sometimes, though, people are just out of touch. Don't try to be a hero and endanger yourself and others. Do what you can without being foolhardy. Talk straight to someone who's violent; be reasonable, but not threatening.

It's important to remember that the roles of helper and helped are interchangeable. You may be helping someone today and being helped tomorrow. That's the way it should be. Our common task is developing our skills so we can help and strengthen one another.

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QUIZ

Nebraska Jail Standards require that jail staff receive eighteen (18) hours of in-service training each year. The Jail Bulletin may be used to supplement in-service training if an officer studies the Bulletin, completes the quiz and this process is documented by the jail administrator for review during the annual jail inspection.

SUBJECT: WHAT TO DO 'TIL THE
SHRINK COMES

MAY, 1991
NUMBER: 75

NAME _____

DATE _____

1. The best thing to do with inmates that have severe psychiatric problems is _____

2. Almost everyone in an emotional crisis is afraid of _____

3. We should all be able to take care of one another.

TRUE _____

FALSE _____

4. Violent people are often _____

5. No matter how flipped out a person is, there's always a part of them that's aware of reality.

TRUE _____

FALSE _____

CREDIT: 1/2 hour credit for jail inservice training requirement

Answer sheet should be retained by jail administrator or training officer.

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2.Almost everyone in an emotional crisis is afraid of LOSING CONTROL.

3.We should all be able to take care of one another.

TRUE _____ FALSE X

4.Violent people are often VERY FRIGHTENED.

5.No matter how flipped out a person is, there's always a part of them that's aware of reality.

TRUE X FALSE _____

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